DARK HORSE COMICS

ROBERT E. HOWARD'S IRONHAND OF ALMURIC

3 OF 4

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ROY THOMAS AND MARK WINCHELL

IRONHAND OF ALMURIC™

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TO THE LAIR OF THE ANCIENTS

INTER-SPACIAL TRANSMISSION BY ESAU CAIRN: "THE STORMS ON THE PLANET ALMURIC ARE UNLIKE ANYTHING EVER WITNESSED ON EARTH.
"FIRST THE ALWAYS-CLOUDLESS SKY TURNED COPPER--NOT UNLIKE THE SKIN OF WYNNEA, THE GIRL WHO'D SHOWED ME HOW TO BYPASS THE GREAT ROCK GIRDLE WHICH ENCIRCLES THE WORLD.
"THE BEASTS OF THE PLAIN SHARED OUR UNEASINESS, AS WE SOUGHT THE SHELTER OF MONOLITHIC BOULDERS.
"A DROVE OF JUMPING PIGS PASSED US, COVERING THE GROUND WITH THIRTY-FOOT LEAPS.
"IN OTHER TIMES, THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN AS DANGEROUS AS ANY PECCARIES OR WILD BOARS ON EARTH--BUT NOW THEY MERELY FLED THE FAST-APPROACHING STORM.
HRONK
HRONK
HRRONK

"A GREAT-TUSKED LION FLED AS THE SKY GOT EVER DARKER.
"IT PAID NO ATTENTION TO THE CORPSE OF THE BAT-WINGED YAGA I HAD SLAIN, A SHORT TIME BEFORE.
"IT HAD KNOWN SUCH STORMS BEFORE, NO DOUBT.
"I WAS FASCINATED, IN SPITE OF THE DANGER.
"THE SUN WAS BLOCKED OUT AS A TANGIBLE DARKNESS SEEMED TO HOVER AN INSTANT IN THE SKY--
"--THEN RUSHED DOWN, CLOAKED THE WORLD IN UTTER BLACKNESS--
"--THROUGH WHICH SHONE NEITHER SUN, NOR MOON, NOR STAR.
"I HAD NEVER KNOWN, BEFORE, HOW IMPENENTRABLE DARKNESS COULD BE.
"I MIGHT HAVE BEEN A BLIND, DISEMBODIED SPIRIT WANDERING THROUGH UNLIGHTED SPACE, BUT FOR THE GRASSES UNDER MY FEET, AND THE SOFTNESS OF WYNNEA'S BODY PRESSING AGAINST MINE.
"A FIERCE WIND HAD RAISED NOW, WAILING LIKE A LOST SOUL.
"IT DID NOT BLOW WITH A STEADY BLAST, BUT SWEPT HERE AND THERE IN MAD, FITFUL GUSTS--
"--EACH LIKE A BUFFET FROM THE FIST OF AN UNSEEN GIANT.
GET-- BEHIND ME--GIRL!
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"YET, IT FELT GOOD TO BE PROTECTING A WOMAN AGAIN-- EVEN IF SHE WASN'T REALLY MY WOMAN.
"MY WOMAN--ALTHA-- HAD PERISHED IN LONELY CHILDBIRTH, WHILE I HAD BEEN OFF PLAYING AT BEING THE MIGHTY HUNTER AND WARLORD OF ALMURIC.
"THEN, DURING A MOMENTARY LULL BETWEEN THE MOANING GUSTS...
ESAU CAIRN-- WE SHOULD--
SHHH! I THOUGHT I HEARD SOMETHING!
OOHHHH
THE HOWLING OF THE WINDS...
ITS BETWEEN THOSE HOWLS. IT'S--A MAN.
NO! I RECOGNIZE IT NOW!
IT'S THE YAGA! HE MUST STILL BE ALIVE!
MAYBE I SHOULD GO SEE IF I CAN HELP HIM...
ARE YOU MAD? HE TRIED TO KILL US TODAY!
LET HIM DIE-- IF INDEED IT IS HE YOU HEARD!
I...WASN'T RAISED THAT WAY.
IF YOU GO OUT THERE AND GET YOURSELF KILLED, WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME?
THEN YOU AND YOUR PARENTS ARE ALL FOOLS!
YOUR CONCERN FOR ME IS TOUCHING, WYNNEA...
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...BUT I'M GOING OUT THERE!
YOU WAIT HERE TILL I GET BACK!
AS IF I HAD A CHOICE!
"I COULD SEE NOTHING AMID THE DARKNESS AS I VENTURED INTO THE WIND THAT SMOTE ME LIKE A LIVING THING.
"AND ALL THE WHILE, I DID NOT HEAR THE MOANING SOUND AGAIN--AND INDEED, WAS HALF BEGINNING TO SUSPECT IT HAD BEEN A FIGMENT OF MY STRAINED IMAGINATION--
"--WHEN I ALL BUT STUMBLED OVER THE FALLEN YAGA.
"I COULD NOT SEE HIM, OF COURSE, BUT I COULD FEEL HIS CHEST RISING AND FALLING... WEAKLY.
OHHH
"I WAS ABOUT TO PICK HIM UP--WHEN SUDDENLY I FELT A HEAVY TREAD MOVING TOWARD US--
"--AND MY HAIR PRICKLED WITH A NAMELESS FEAR.
RRM
"I TURNED--EXPECTING TO SEE NOTHING IN THE TOTAL BLACKNESS--
"--AND I WOULD NOT HAVE SEEN ANYTHING--
MB
LL
4

"--EXCEPT THAT THE DARKNESS LIVED, WITH A CLASHING OF GIGANTIC TEETH!
RROOARR
"THIS WAS ONE OF THE 'BLIND ONES' OF WHOM I HAD HEARD ONLY DIM LEGENDS.
"THEY DWELT, IT WAS SAID, IN THE BLACKNESS OF THE STORM.
"WHENCE THEY CAME, WHITHER THEY WENT--NONE KNEW.
"BUT SUDDENLY, IT WAS THERE--AND IT WAS HUNGRY.
"I WAS TERRIFIED AND ANGRY, IN EQUAL PARTS.
"BLINDLY, I LASHED OUT AND UPWARD FEELING MY SWORD MEET PALPABLE SUBSTANCE.
"A WARM LIQUID SPURTED UNSEEN ALONG MY ARM--
"--AND THEN, WITH ANOTHER TERRIBLE ROAR, THIS TIME MORE OF PAIN THAN OF RAGE, THE MONSTER SHAMBLED AWAY--
RR
"--SHAKING THE EARTH WITH ITS TREAD, AND DIMMING THE SHRIEKING WIND WITH ITS BELLOWING.
RARRRR
"I DID NOT REMAIN TO SEE HOW BADLY MY BLOW HAD HURT IT.
"NOT MUCH, I SUSPECTED.
"I MADE MY WAY SWIFTLY, THOUGH STILL IN FULL DARKNESS, BACK TO THE SHELTER OF THE BOULDERS--
"--AND WYNNEA.
I HEARD--ONE OF THE BLIND ONES!
YOU KNEW ONE OF THEM MIGHT BE LURKING IN THE STORM, DIDN'T YOU?
WHY THE HELL DIDN'T YOU TELL ME BEFORE I WENT OUT AND NEARLY GOT MYSELF KILLED?
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YOU HARDLY ASKED MY OPINION, IRONHAND.
LOOK! THE DARKNESS MELTS!
MY GOD!
"'MELTS' WAS THE RIGHT WORD FOR IT.
"THE PITCH-BLACKNESS SEEMED TO SHRED OUT-- TO TEAR IN LONG STREAMERS.
"THE SUN CAME OUT-- BUT THE SKY WAS BARRED FANTASTICALLY WITH LONG STRIPS OF DARKNESS--
"--TANGIBLE SHADOWS FLOATING ABOVE THE GROUND, WITH BROAD SPACES OF SUNLIGHT IN BETWEEN.
"THERE WAS NO GRADUAL SHADING. THE STRIPS WERE AS CLEAR-CUT AND DEFINITE AS RIBBONS OF EBONY ON A BACK-GROUND OF BRIGHT BLUE.
"AS FAR AS I COULD SEE, ALMURIC WAS STRIPPED WITH THOSE BLACK RIBBONS.
"THE SCENE BELOW MIGHT HAVE BEEN A DREAM LAND-SCAPE OF AN OPIUM-EATER...
"SOME SCURRYING DEER FLITTED ACROSS A SUNLIGHT BAND--TO VANISH ABRUPTLY IN A BROAD STREAMER OF BLACK-- AND TO FLASH, JUST AS SUDDENLY, INTO LIGHT AND SIGHT AGAIN.
"SIGHT COULD NOT PIERCE THOSE RIBBONS OF BLACK-- BUT THEY WERE THINNING.
DIVIDING.
DISAPPEARING.
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"THE YOUTHFUL-LOOKING YAGA HAD NOT BEEN HURT AS BADLY AS I'D THOUGHT, WHEN HE'D HURTLED FROM THE SKY--WITH ME LANDING ON TOP OF HIM.
'I MADE A TRAVOIS AND PULLED HIM ALONG BEHIND ME.
I'VE SAID IT BEFORE, ESAU CAIRN, AND I'LL SAY IT AGAIN--
YOU'RE A FOOL! EVEN IF HE DOESN'T ESCAPE AND SLIT YOUR THROAT AS HE TRIED TO DO BEFORE, HE'LL ONLY SLOW US DOWN IN THAT CONDITION.
THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN TRUE WHEN I WAS JUST ANOTHER MUSCLE MAN BACK ON EARTH, GIRL...
BUT SINCE COMING TO ALMURIC, I'VE GROWN FAR STRONGER THAN ANYONE ON EITHER WORLD.
IF NOTHING ELSE, I WANT TO LEARN IF HE'S THE ONLY ONE WHO ESCAPED THE DOOM WE BROUGHT TO HIS FELLOW YAGAS--
--OR IF QUEEN YASMEENA TRULY LIVES, AS HE CLAIMS.
"FOR DAYS WE TRAIPSED ACROSS THAT NIGH-BARREN PLAIN.
"I PROVIDED THE FOOD, AND WYNNEA COOKED IT.
"THE YAGA LIVED ON... BUT HE NEVER SEEMED TO AWAKEN.
"HE'D GONE INTO SOME WEIRD COMA OF HIS OWN.
"ALL IN ALL, IN SOME WAYS I KNEW I WOULD BE SORRY WHEN WE FINALLY REACHED THE CITY WHERE WYNNEA HAD BEEN BORN...

"I'M SURE I DON'T HAVE TO SPELL OUT WHAT THOSE WAYS WERE.
SO, YAGA-- YOU'VE AWAKENED AT LAST--
--JUST IN TIME TO SPY ON US!
I SPY ON NO ONE! QUEEN YASMEENA SENT ME TO KILL YOU--
--AND I FAILED!
WHY DO YOU NOT SLAY ME? SHE WILL, IF I RETURN TO HER, MY MISSION UNDONE.
DON'T WORRY, BOY. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO RETURN TO YASMEENA-- IF SHE'S REALLY STILL ALIVE.
NOW, TELL ME AGAIN HOW SHE ESCAPED THE DOOM I SAW BEFALL HER ON THE ROCK YUTHLA.
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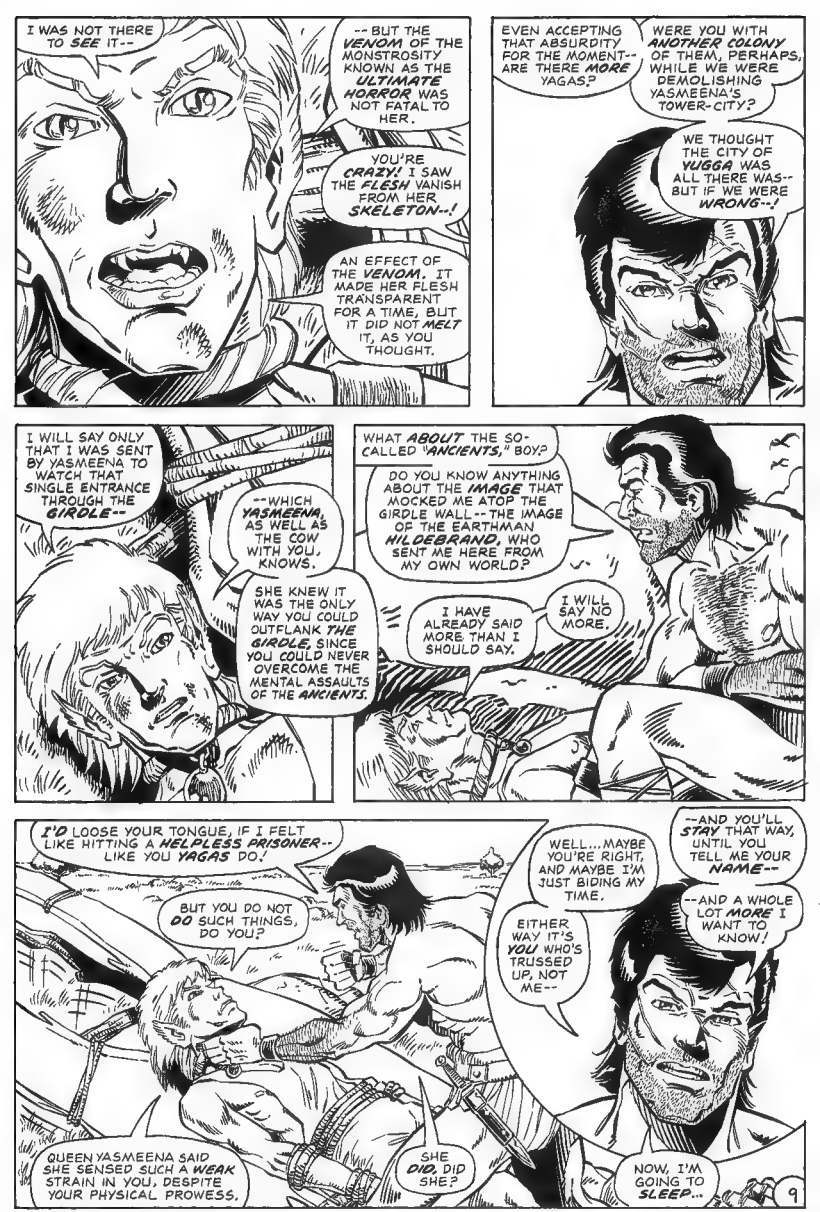
I WAS NOT THERE TO SEE IT--
-- BUT THE VENOM OF THE MONSTROSITY KNOWN AS THE ULTIMATE HORROR WAS NOT FATAL TO HER.
YOU'RE CRAZY! I SAW THE FLESH VANISH FROM HER SKELETON--!
AN EFFECT OF THE VENOM. IT MADE HER FLESH TRANSPARENT FOR A TIME, BUT IT DID NOT MELT IT, AS YOU THOUGHT.
EVEN ACCEPTING THAT ABSURDITY FOR THE MOMENT-- ARE THERE MORE YAGAS?
WERE YOU WITH ANOTHER COLONY OF THEM, PERHAPS, WHILE WE WERE DEMOLISHING YASMEENA'S TOWER-CITY?
WE THOUGHT THE CITY OF VUGGA WAS ALL THERE WAS-- BUT IF WE WERE WRONG--!
I WILL SAY ONLY THAT I WAS SENT BY YASMEENA TO WATCH THAT SINGLE ENTRANCE THROUGH THE GIRDLE--
--WHICH YASMEENA, AS WELL AS THE COW WITH YOU, KNOWS.
SHE KNEW IT WAS THE ONLY WAY YOU COULD OUTFLANK THE GIRDLE, SINCE YOU COULD NEVER OVERCOME THE MENTAL ASSAULTS OF THE ANCIENTS.
WHAT ABOUT THE SO-CALLED "ANCIENTS," BOY?
DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE IMAGE THAT MOCKED ME ATOP THE GIRDLE WALL-- THE IMAGE OF THE EARTHMAN HILDEBRAND, WHO SENT ME HERE FROM MY OWN WORLD?
I HAVE ALREADY SAID MORE THAN I SHOULD SAY.
I WILL SAY NO MORE.
I'D LOOSE YOUR TONGUE, IF I FELT LIKE HITTING A HELPLESS PRISONER-- LIKE YOU YAGAS DO!
BUT YOU DO NOT DO SUCH THINGS, DO YOU?
QUEEN YASMEENA SAID SHE SENSED SUCH A WEAK STRAIN IN YOU, DESPITE YOUR PHYSICAL PROWESS.
SHE DID, DID SHE?
WELL... MAYBE YOU'RE RIGHT, AND MAYBE I'M JUST BIDING MY TIME.
EITHER WAY IT'S YOU WHO'S TRUSSED UP, NOT ME--
--AND YOU'LL STAY THAT WAY, UNTIL YOU TELL ME YOUR NAME--
--AND A WHOLE LOT MORE I WANT TO KNOW!
NOW, I'M GOING TO SLEEP...

SOMEHOW, AFTER THE VERBAL FIREWORKS WITH THE YAGA, I WAS MORE ANXIOUS TO SEE OUR JOURNEY END THAN BEFORE...
MORE ROCK FORMATIONS!
WHERE IS THIS CITY OF YOURS, ANYWAY, GIRL?
WHY, DIDN'T YOU KNOW?
YOU HAVE JUST ENTERED IT!
GOOD LORD!
IRONHAND OF ALMURIC--
--WELCOME TO THE TERRITORY OF JHUMA!
YOU DIDN'T EVEN SAY WE WERE GETTING CLOSE--
IF YOU'VE LED ME INTO A TRAP GIRL--!
--AND NOW ARMED MEN SPRING UP FROM EVERY CREVICE!
I PRAY FORGIVE US THAT WE DID NOT RECOGNIZE YOU FROM THE FIRST--
--PRINCESS WYNNEA!
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"PRINCESS"!? BUT--IF THAT'S TRUE--WHY DIDN'T YOU EVER TELL ME--OR ANY OTHER KOTHIAN?
I DARED NOT TELL YASMEENA--FOR SHE WOULD ONLY HAVE SLAIN ME OUTRIGHT, AS A POTENTIAL RIVAL.
EVEN WHEN YOU RESCUED US, I DID NOT KNOW HOW YOU WOULD TREAT ROYALTY FROM BEYOND THE GIRDLE.
BESIDES--I WAS NOT ROYALTY IN KOTH.
I GUESS THAT MAKES SENSE--MORE OR LESS.
PRINCESS! YOU HAVE BROUGHT A YAGA TO US!
KILL HIM, WARRIORS!
THE YAGA'S MY PRISONER--
--AND NO ONE'S KILLING HIM, UNTIL AND UNLESS I DO!
GGKK
ESAU CAIRN--!
"ESAU CAIRN"!
SO THAT IS THE NAME OF MY NEW ENEMY.
BUT DO NOT FEAR--I WILL NOT SLAY YOU WHILE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE PRINCESS, WHO CLEARLY FAVORS YOU.
I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT YOU KILLING ME ANYTIME--THOUGH I GUESS YOU'RE WELCOME TO TRY.
SHALL WE, MI-LADY?

YOU HAVE MADE A POWERFUL FOE IN FARZAAN THE BOLD, ESALI CAIRN.
IS THAT HIS NAME?
I WON'T LOSE ANY SLEEP OVER IT.
THERE-- IS JHUMA.
IMPRESSIVE.
COME. I'LL SHOW YOU THE HOSPITALITY OF MY CITY, THIS TIME.
THIS CITY IS EVEN LARGER AND GRANDER THAN KOTH-- OR ANY ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE GIRDLE.
HOW YOU MUST HAVE SNICKERED UP YOUR SLEEVE AT ME, LORDING IT OVER A LESSER CITY THAN THE ONE YOU CAME FROM!
DID I SAY I DID?
THANKS BE TO THAK!--
QUEEN WYNNEA HAS RETURNED TO THOSE WHO HAVE SORELY MISSED HER!
GREETINGS, SARNATH SOOTH-SAYER.
BUT-- YOU CALLED ME-- QUEEN!?
M-MY FATHER IS HE--?

DEAD. I FEAR, YOUR MAJESTY-- THESE TWO YEARS NOW.
YOUR HUMBLE SERVANT HAS SERVED AS REGENT --BUT REJOICES THAT JHUMA'S RIGHTFUL RULER HAS RETURNED.
FATHER-- DEAD? YOU MUST TELL ME HOW--
IT WAS A FEVER THAT--
BY THE GODS! IS THAT A YAGA I SEE--AFTER ALL THIS TIME?
FARZAAN! WHY WAS HE NOT SLAIN, THE MOMENT YOU BEHELD HIM?
SHAMAN-- I--
THE STRANGE YAGA IS MY PRISONER, AND I WANT HIM ALIVE.
YOUR PRISONER? HE'S MINE...!
THAT WOULD MEAN NOTHING TO SARNATH.
IT IS BETTER MY WAY.
AS YOU COMMAND, HIGHNESS.
BUT YOUR FATHER WOULD NEVER HAVE SUFFERED A YAGA TO LIVE.
I THINK HE WOULD HAVE.
--IF HE KNEW WHAT I KNOW.
"I FIGURED I MUST HAVE SOME KIND OF AFFINITY FOR ALMURIC'S QUEENS.
"I JUST WATCHED WYNNEA OPERATE, DUMB-FOUNDED.
"FIRST YASMEENA, NOW HER.

"SARNATH'S SUDDEN SNARL BROUGHT ME BACK TO REALITY...
HIGHNESS--WHO IS THIS INTERLOPER?
HE HAS ABOUT HIM THE LOOK OF THE ALIEN--
--AS IF HE HAD COME FROM BEYOND THE GIRDLE!
HE IS...
I CAN SPEAK FOR MYSELF, WYNNEA.
I AM FROM BEYOND THE GIRDLE--'WAY BEYOND!
I'M ESAU CAIRN--ALSO KNOWN AS IRONHAND.
AND ARE YOU NOW IN THE SERVICE OF HER MAJESTY?
WELL--ACTUALLY, I--
HE SAVED MY LIFE, SARNATH...
...AND I MEAN TO MAKE HIM JHUMA'S CHIEF OF WARRIORS!
FARZAAN--AREN'T YOU CHIEF OF WARRIORS?
NO MORE, IT SEEMS.
AGAIN, MAGESTY...
...AS YOU COMMAND!
"IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT IT WOULD BE EASY TO GET TO LIKE LIVING AROUND HERE.
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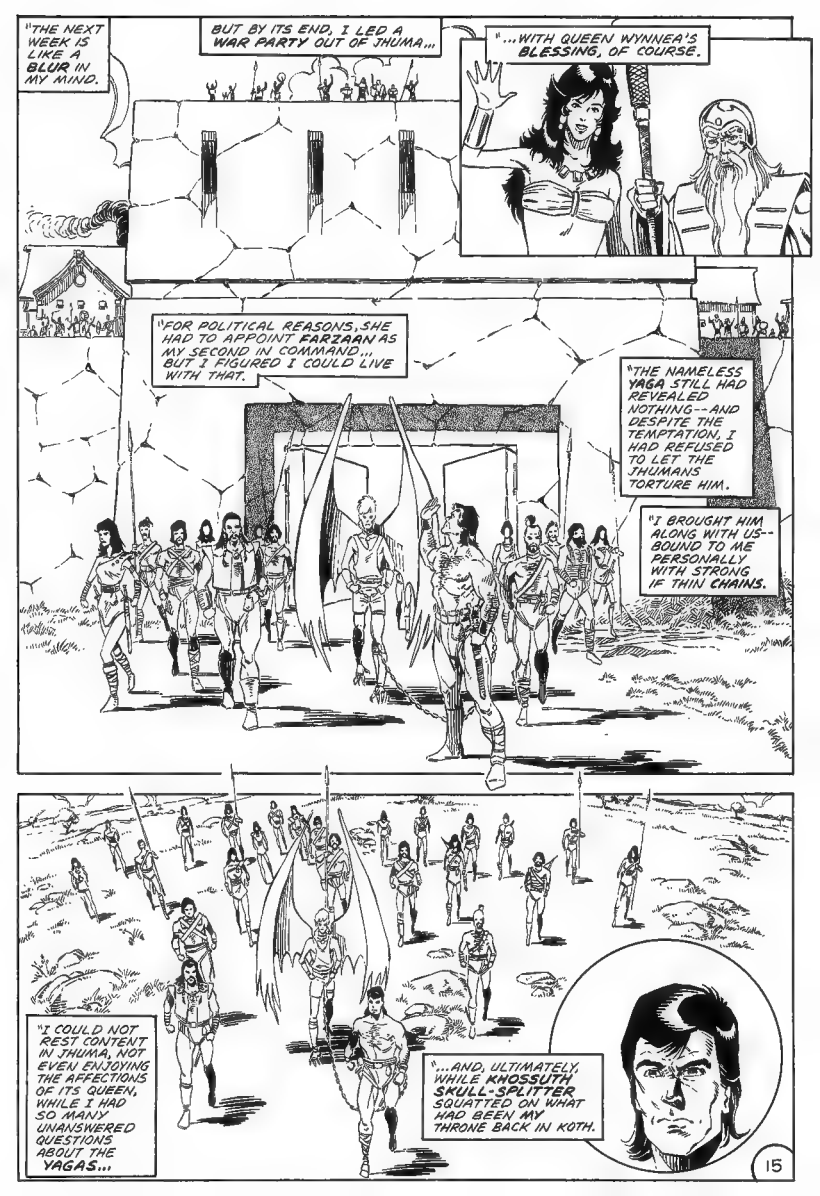
"THE NEXT WEEK IS LIKE A BLUR IN MY MIND.
BUT BY ITS END, I LED A WAR PARTY OUT OF JHUMA...
"...WITH QUEEN WYNNEA'S BLESSING, OF COURSE.
"FOR POLITICAL REASONS, SHE HAD TO APPOINT FARZAAN AS MY SECOND IN COMMAND... BUT I FIGURED I COULD LIVE WITH THAT.
"THE NAMELESS YAGA STILL HAD REVEALED NOTHING--AND DESPITE THE TEMPTATION, I HAD REFUSED TO LET THE JHUMANS TORTURE HIM.
"I BROUGHT HIM ALONG WITH US--BOUND TO ME PERSONALLY. WITH STRONG IF THIN CHAINS.
"I COULD NOT REST CONTENT IN JHUMA, NOT EVEN ENJOYING THE AFFECTIONS OF ITS QUEEN, WHILE I HAD SO MANY UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE YAGAS...
"...AND, ULTIMATELY, WHILE KNOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER SQUATTED ON WHAT HAD BEEN MY THRONE BACK IN KOTH.

"AS WE MARCHED, I THOUGHT OF MY CONVERSATION THAT FIRST NIGHT WITH THE SHAMAN SARNATH SOOTHSAYER:
...SO IT WAS YOUR DESTRUCTION OF THEIR CITY WHICH HALTED THE RAIDS OF THE YAGAS, MONTHS AGO!
WE IN JHUMA KNEW ONLY THAT THE WINGED DEVILS CAME NO MORE TO STEAL SLAVES AND AND TREASURE.
YOU GURAS ALL NEEDED A HERO...
...AND I GUESS I WAS IT.
TRUE-- BUT YOU WERE NOT THE FIRST SUCH HERO FROM ANOTHER ANOTHER WORLD TO APPEAR SUDDENLY ON ALMURIC.
HUH? I WASN'T?
WHO THE DEVIL BEAT ME TO IT?
PLEASE-- I HAVE SAID TOO MUCH ALREADY.
IT IS BAD FORTUNE TO SPEAK OF THEM.
THAT'S NOTHING COMPARED TO THE BAD LUCK YOUR GOING TO HAVE IF YOU CLAM UP ON ME NOW, SARNATH.
SPILL IT!
YOUR WORDS RING STRANGE IN MY EARS... BUT I GRASP THEIR CRUDE MENACE.
YET NOT EVEN THE QUEEN'S FAVORITE MAY TELL SUCH SECRET THINGS.
THEN WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME?
THOSE DOOMED CHAMPIONS ARE BOUND UP, IN SOME WAY WE UNDERSTAND NOT, WITH THE LEGENDS OF-- THE ANCIENTS.
THE MYSTERIOUS LONG-DEAD RACE THAT RULED ALMURIC AGES AGO?
HOW DID YOU KNOW--?
THE YAGA QUEEN MENTIONED THEM. GO ON.
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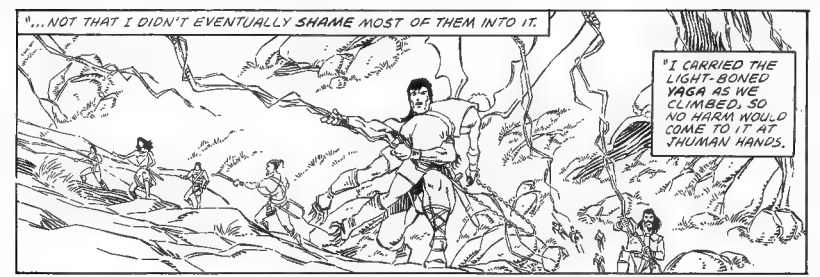
AS YOU SAY, THE ANCIENTS POSSESSED THE LAND BEFORE EITHER MAN OR YAGA.
THEY WERE MYSTERIOUS BEINGS--
-- SHROUDED IN BLINDING LIGHT TOO DAZZLING FOR MEN'S EYES TO PIERCE.
"ONLY A SELECT FEW WERE EVER ALLOWED TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM -- AND THESE WERE HONORED AS PROPHETS.
"ONE DAY, LONG AND LONG AGO, THEY DEPARTED FOR AN UNKNOWN PLACE,,, LEAVING US 'SMOOTH MEN' AS THE PLANET'S GUARDIANS.
"BUT WHEN THE YAGAS APPEARED IN THE SKIES OVERHEAD--
"--'OUR RACE WAS NOT EQUAL TO THAT SACRED TASK.
THE VILE YAGAS KILLED MANY OF OUR MEN-- STOLE MANY OF OUR WOMEN AND GIRL-CHILDREN.
FROM THAT DAY UNTIL YOU BROUGHT BACK QUEEN WYNNEA TO US, WE NEVER KNEW A DAY EMPTY OF FEAR OF A YAGA RAID.

AS FOR THE ANCIENTS-- THE PROPHETS WHO KNEW THEM BEST SWORE THEY WENT TO DWELL AT XATHAR, THE ICY POINT MOST DISTANT FROM THE GIRDLE.
YOUR "SOUTH POLE," EH?
A COLD BLUE FLAME DANCES FOREVER ABOVE XATHAR--
--AND NO MAN SINCE THOSE ELDER DAYS HAS DARED EVEN TRY TO JOURNEY THERE.
YOU'RE AN ADVENTUROUS LOT, AREN'T YOU, FOR ALL YOUR BOASTING AND HEAD-BASHING.
"NOW, ON THE TRAIL, I TRIED TO GOAD THE YAGA INTO ADDING ANYTHING HE MIGHT KNOW TO SARNATH'S WORDS.
"BUT HE KEPT HIS SILENCE REFUSING EVEN TO SPEAK...
"TO THE AMUSEMENT OF FARZAAN AND HIS PARTIZANS.
MAYBE I SHOULD TURN YOU OVER TO FARZAAN, YOU BLUE-SKINNED DEVIL!
WELL, AT LEAST, IF THERE ARE OTHER YAGAS WHERE WE'RE GOING, WE'LL HAVE A HOSTAGE.
AND IF YOU'RE REALLY ONE OF THE LAST SURVIVING YAGAS-- PERHAPS QUEEN YASMEENA WON'T RISK HURTING YOU.
WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THAT, YAGA?
"IF LOOKS COULD KILL--HE PRONOUNCED A DOOM ON ME, IN THAT MOMENT.

"THEN, MIDWAY BETWEEN JHUM AND XATHAR...
THERE IT IS!
JUST AS SARNATH DESCRIBED IT...
"IN ITS WAY, IT WAS A SMALLER YUGGA--THOUGH WITH NO CITY AT THE TOP.
"SARNATH HAD SPOKEN OF BAT-LIKE FIGURES SEEN FLITTING THERE FROM TIME TO TIME, SINCE YAGA RAIDS HAD CEASED.
...THE SO-CALLED TOWER OF DEVILS!
"BUT THE ROCK WAS TALL WITH A SINGLE CAVE-HOLE NEAR ITS SUMMIT, SO NO JHUMAN HAD SCALED IT TO DISTURB WHAT WHAT PERHAPS WAS LEFT UNDISTURBED.
"NOR WERE THEY PARTICULARLY EAGER TO DO SO NOW...


"...NOT THAT I DIDN'T EVENTUALLY SHAME MOST OF THEM INTO IT.
"I CARRIED THE LIGHT-BONED YAGA AS WE CLIMBED, SO NO HARM WOULD COME TO IT AT JHUMAN HANDS.

I WARN YOU, IRONHAND--QUEEN YASMEENA WILL CUT THESE VINES, LONG BEFORE YOU REACH THE TOP!
"NOW IT WAS MY TURN TO MAINTAIN A STONY SILENCE...
"...THOUGH FARZAAN AND HIS FOLLOWERS SHUDDERED NERVOUSLY.

"STILL, NO YASMEENA APPEARED... AND WE SOON REACHED THE SUMMIT.
WHY DIDN'T YOUR PRECIOUS QUEEN STOP US BEFORE NOW, YAGA?
SHE--HAS A PLAN, NEVER FEAR.
"STONY STAIRS LED DOWN WITHIN THE YAWNING APERTURE...

"...SO IN WE WENT.
YOU DOOM ME, IRON-HAND.
IT IS DEATH TO SEE THE CHAMBER WITHIN A SECOND TIME!
WHY SHOULD I WORRY.
THIS IS ONLY MY FIRST TRIP.
"STILL, I WAS AS STARTLED AS THE JHUMANS WHEN WE SUDDENLY ROUNDED A CORNER AND CAME FACE TO FACE WITH--
"--YASMEENA, QUEEN OF THE YAGAS!
SO-- WE MEET ONCE MORE, ESAU CAIRN!
"THIS, THEN, WAS THE SECRET OF THE TOWER ROCK.
"A YAGA BIRTH CHAMBER, WHERE THE EGGS LAID BY THE YAGA QUEEN WERE HATCHED.
"MY PET YAGA ALREADY HAD A NUMBER OF BABY BROTHERS-- THOUGH YASMEELA WOULD HAVE SLAIN ANY FEMALES THAT HATCHED.
ARE THERE NO OTHER ADULT YAGAS, DEMONESS?
AND WHY ARE THESE SOMEHOW DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE YOU SENT TO KILL ME.
HE IS DIFFERENT, IRONHAND-- BECAUSE, UNLIKE THEM, HE IS ONLY HALF YAGA.
OR DIDN'T YOU RECOGNIZE--
--YOUR OWN SON?
HA HA HA

I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE THE HEIGHT OF IRONY IF IT WERE OUR OFFSPRING WHO KILLED YOU, AT MY COMMAND.
OR, IF YOU HAD KILLED HIM, YOU SEEMED THE TYPE TO BE OVERCOME WITH GRIEF WHEN YOU LEARNED THE TRUTH.
NO! THAT CANNOT BE TRUE, MY QUEEN!
AND IF IT WERE -- WHY DID YOU NOT TELL ME?
YOU EXPECT A YAGA MOTHER TO FEEL AN EMOTION FOR HER HATCHINGS?
BUT YOU HAVE FAILED ME, YOUTH--
--SO I WILL SLAY YOUR FATHER MYSELF!
'MY REFLEXES WERE SLOW BECAUSE I WAS STILL TAKING IT ALL IN--
"-- AND THAT NEARLY COST ME MY LIFE.
DIE ASSASSIN OF THE YAGA RACE!
21

"I SAW HER BLADE DESCENDING TOWARD MY FACE...
"THEN--
UNNNH--
THUNK!
"THE CHAIN WIELDED BY THE YAGA--MY SON?--HAD BROKEN YASMEELA'S NECK, BEFORE SHE HAD TIME TO BE CHOKED.
I SHOULD HAVE REALIZED--
THE WAY SHE TREATED ME--THE WAY SHE SPOKE OF YOU WITH SUCH LOATHING--
I SHOULD HAVE GUESSED--!
THEN--YOU THINK SHE WAS TELLING THE TRUTH?
BUT IT'S BEEN LESS THAN A YEAR SINCE SHE AND I--
I MEAN--
I DO NOT KNOW HOW LONG IT TAKES GURAS OR MEN OF YOUR RACE TO GROW TO ADULTHOOD, IRONHAND...
BUT YAGAS ARE BORN NEARLY FULL-GROWN, LIKE THOSE YOU SEE NEARBY.
THEY ARE ONLY A FEW DAYS OLD...
...WHILE I WAS HATCHED NOT LONG BEFORE SHE SENT ME TO SLAY YOU.
BUT--WHY DIDN'T YOU KILL ME?
CRUEL AS YOUR MOTHER WAS--SHE WAS STILL YOUR QUEEN, SO--
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WATCH OUT, EVERY-BODY--
WE'VE GOT TO--
THE YOUNGER YAGAS--!
HAIL MASTER!
HAIL, MASTER OF ALL YAGAS!
HAIL, SLAYER OF OUR QUEEN!
IT'S SOME SORT OF TRICK! KILL THEM ALL!
IT IS NO TRICK. THE SLAYER OF THE QUEEN-MOTHER BECOMES THEIR MASTER.
USUALLY, OF COURSE, IT HAS BEEN ANOTHER QUEEN...
STAY YOUR HAND, FARZAAN...
THIS SITUATION HAS POSSIBILITIES.
THAT STILL DOESN'T EXPLAIN WHY YOU KILLED YOUR MOTHER INSTEAD OF LETTING HER KILL YOUR FATHER.
SURELY, YOU COULDN'T HAVE ANY FILIAL FEELINGS FOR ME...
YAGAS ARE HATCHED BONDED TO THEIR QUEEN-MOTHER... BUT I ALWAYS FELT... SOMETHING ELSE, AS WELL...
...SOMETHING I ONLY UNDERSTOOD WHEN I HEARD THE TRUTH--AND SAW THE QUEEN ABOUT TO SLAY YOU.
23

I'LL BUY THAT.
HOW SOON WILL ALL THESE HATCHLINGS BE AS ADULT IN THEIR MINDS AS YOU ARE?
A FEW DAYS, AT MOST. BUT WHY--?
BECAUSE I NEED THEM TO GET US THROUGH ANY DEFENSES WHICH THE ANCIENTS MAY HAVE ERECTED AROUND XATHAR!
ARE YOU MAD, ESAU IRONHAND?
QUEEN WYNNEA ORDERED US TO FOLLOW YOU TO THIS TOWER-- NOT TO THE FAR END OF THE WORLD!
BUT YOU WILL, FARZAAN-- OR YOU'LL ANSWER TO ME, NOT TO YOUR QUEEN!
I'M GOING TO FIND OUT WHO OR WHAT REALLY BROUGHT ME TO ALMURIC-- AND WHY--
--AND WHY I SAW PROF. HILDEBRAND'S FACE LEERING AT ME, ATOP THE GIRDLE!
IF THE ANSWER LIES ANYWHERE ON THIS PLANET--IT LIES AT THE SOUTH POLE!
WHO KNOWS?
IF THEY'RE SOMEHOW RESPONSIBLE FOR MY BEING HERE, THE SO-CALLED "ANCIENTS" MAY GREET ME LIKE AN OLD FRIEND...
YEAH. SURE...
...AND MAYBE, BACK HOME, ROOSEVELT WON'T RUN FOR A THIRD TERM!
NEXT: XATHAR!
24

Flogging a Dead Horse

Every now and then we need someone or something to re-focus our cynical little lives. We scamper about trying to get done all those things that need to get done before everybody starts gripin' at you as to why they're not done yet! When attending this year's conventions, talking to various industry folk on the phone, or just standing around jawin' at the local comics shop, I'll occasionally hear myself (or another rotting cadaver like myself!) grousing about this or that and, in general, complaining about how comics aren't as vital and exciting a medium as in the days of old, i.e. my childhood years.

Now, things have certainly changed since then, but less vital and exciting? Methinks perhaps the excitement level (or lack thereof) may have something to do with one's own perspective! Fortunately, I have encountered several people in recent months who, for various reasons, have shaken me from my embittered old ways. Take young **Tommy Edwards**, for instance. Two weeks prior to leaving for San Diego I got a call from a worried mom whose son was going in for major surgery. Tommy is a talented young artist attending high school who has just been accepted into the Arts Center in Pasadena, Ca.

His mom wanted to know if we could send him a few comics and a "get well" message, as Dark Horse is one of his favorite publishers. We made sure he had something to read when he came to after surgery and last week I received his letter of thanks, photos, and samples of his artwork. He's literally beaming with enthusiasm for the medium and has completely bowled me over! The letter revealed his reason for being in the hospital in the first place which is, ironically, and sadly, similar to the other person whose predicament has had a real effect on me recently.

Rachelle Menashe (occasional DH colorist and our production manager's lady), like Tommy, was struck and injured by a drunk driver. News came as we were just beginning to work the **San Diego Comic Con** and, needless to say, **Chris Chalenor** was on a plane and at her side within hours. By Sunday evening Rachelle was downgraded from critical to serious, and about 40 comics professionals gave of themselves and drew some pretty damn impressive "get well" cards of support. I wasn't there when she first saw them, but I've seen the results... a mere five weeks later and this girl is doing great! Forty people taking the time and energy to care about someone that most of them had never even met!

With Tommy and Rachelle on the road to recovery, there are people with far less traumatic recent histories who have also opened my eyes to the *vita* that still exists in comics. People like the good folks from Houston, Texas, **Joe Nozemack**, **Isabeau**, and **Chip Mosher** from Musabelle's Comics, **C.K. Lichenstein** from Phoenix Comics, and **Jim Ashby**, **David "Mac" McLemore**, and of course, the eternal punker **Will (Evan Dorkin** in training!**) Freed**! A great group whose positive energy and love of comics practically shines from their bright faces. Or how about **Lyn Pederson** from Page After Page in Las Vegas, or **Mary Alice Wilson** from Yellow Springs, Ohio? Now *there* are a couple of hearts of that just won't quit— exploding with both ideas and healthy, constructive criticism! Or how about **Shannon Stewart** from Georgia, or **Brian McQuery** from the Chicago area?

So, yeah, it sucks that some people are collecting, not reading, comics and that a good percentage of John & Jane Q. Public still regard our medium like they do yet another oil spill off the coast. But there are also a lot of great things going on in the world of comics thanks to the likes of **Dan Clowes**, **Cindy Goff**, **Geof Darrow**, **Peter Bagge**, **Frank Miller**, **Rafael Nieves**, **Dan Brereton**, and a whole slew of new, young, "undiscovered" talent just champin' at the bit to make their mark in this totally vital medium for expression.

All right, I'll climb off my soapbox and let you get to the checklist below! (At least I didn't ramble on about how great Dark Horse Comics are!)

Just trying to be,

Bob Schreck

Mike Richardson • publisher

Neil Hankerson • v-p of operations

Bob Schreck • marketing director

Brad Horn • controller

Debbie Byrd • operations assistant

Randy Stradley • executive editor

Diana Schutz • managing editor

Barbara Kesel, Jerry Prosser, Chris Warner • editorial staff

Cece Cutsforth • art director

Chris Chalenor • production manager

Steven Birch, Cary Grazzini, Ray Gruen, Carolyn Megyesi, Jack Pollock, Steve Posey, Monty Sheldon, Sean Tierney • production

Tiffany Schlebohm • receptionist

CHECKLIST

☐ **SHIPPING NOVEMBER 5**
Dark Horse Presents #56
Aliens Genocide #1
Venus Wars #8

☐ **SHIPPING NOVEMBER 12**
Cheval Noir #24
Terminator: The Enemy Within #1
John Byrne's 2112 graphic novel

☐ **SHIPPING NOVEMBER 19**
Bill 99 #3
Badlands #5
Predator Cold War #3
Concrete #4

☐ **SHIPPING NOVEMBER 26**
Almuric #3
Deadline #2
The Mask #4
Aliens Tribes

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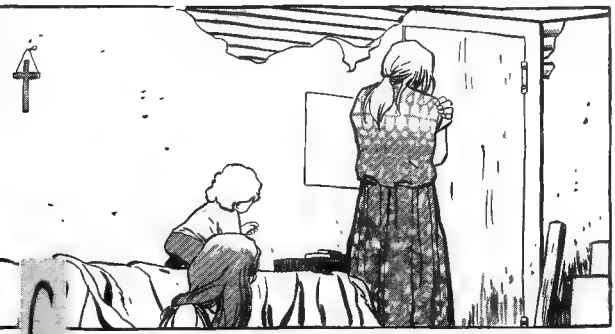

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Cheval Noir #24

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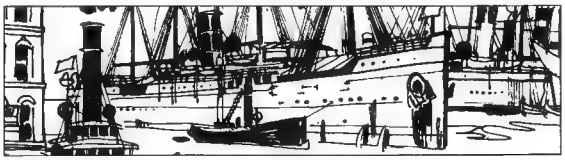

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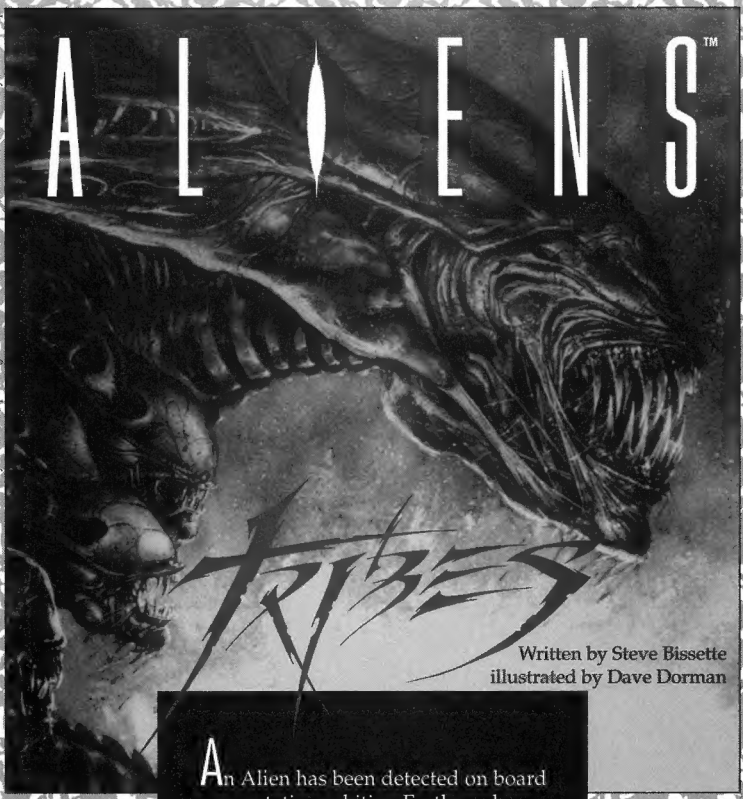

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